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TEACHING THE MISSION

Teaching through Trump (and My Own Bias)

By Michael Serazio

Like 99.9 percent of college faculty across the United States (a conservative estimate), I spent election night 2016 watching cable news unfold with a slow dawning dread in the pit of my stomach. I'd been expecting to tune into a coronation of joy – a night where I'd get to wake up my three-year-old daughter to tell her that she (finally!) had a role model of her own gender commanding the highest office in the land. I had even worn, to vote, the closest approximation to a white pantsuit that I could manage.

What unfolded instead was the disorienting decision of a nation that I suddenly didn't recognize. We faculty are, on some level, paid to be people of certainty. So being disoriented should tell us something. And give us a dose of (and a pause for) humility.

How, therefore, should we now try to teach through President Donald Trump? That day after in November forced many of us to consider abandoning syllabi trajectories and addressing the GOP elephant in the room – a subject well tangential to calculus or nursing or linguistics.

Not so for this communication professor and certainly not in a semester when I'd deliberately scheduled my "News Media and Democracy" course to coincide with the elections. Moreover, as a former journalist, continuing news junkie, and scholar of political communication, I am, frankly, *always* trying to shoehorn contemporary politics into classroom conversation.

Perhaps the stunning election

outcome – and the upheaval and uncertainty it has already wrought – will make those invocations feel less tangential. If you teach culture and globalization, you now have to talk about Trump. If you teach fossil fuel chemistry, you now have to talk about Trump. If you teach trade economics, you now have to talk about Trump. There is no space from which to stand apart; no ivory tower redoubt.

And when class is dismissed, maybe President Trump will ignite an impassioned, activist generation for whom President Barack Obama's politics had been taken for granted as background white noise. If so, one might be able to make out the thinnest of silver linings among the fast-approaching storm clouds: quads alive with protest, apathy suddenly unfashionable.

But a true "examen" of classroom conscience probably requires pushing deeper and probing that uncomfortable query to which I do not yet have a confident response: How much of my own political bias do I have a responsibility to insulate from or inflict upon my students?

The decorous answer is to retreat behind a familiar shield: that I am "just" here to teach critical thinking skills. This is true, laudable, and, yet, also feels like something of a dodge – what we faculty say to each other with a wink and a knowing glance that such critical thinking can only *inevitably* lead our students down the primrose progressive path.

But if I'm reading my Foucault right – and, to be sure, that is an "if"

the size of *The Order of Things* – the game of knowledge that we arrange (through syllabi starting points, subsequent discussion questions, and eventual exams) is already rigged with a particular ideological inflection. Where, then, does that leave our Trump supporters in the lecture hall?

The day after the election – and in the months since – I've been thinking a lot about them. Without question, our students coming from demographic backgrounds who feel vulnerable because of Trump's rhetoric, actions, and policies need to be at the forefront of pastoral concern: women, Mexicans, Muslims, those with disabilities, people unsettled by the frequent use of CAPS LOCK on Twitter, and so on.

But I have no doubt got #MAGA believers in class and – like those polled in months leading up to the election – they are probably reluctant to admit it openly. Aren't they deserving of a welcoming space, too? If so, how? If not, why not?

Unlike Trump (and perhaps Foucault?), I still believe in verifiable – not alternative – facts. Our deployment to that battlefield must never lapse, and it seems to be more essential than ever now to be able to call BS on the charlatans.

Simultaneously, though, there is a bias that I'm not afraid to defend: one that seeks to make my students more empathetic, one that seeks to open their hearts along with their minds. That may well manifest itself politically toward different conclusions at different historical moments, but I retain an untroubled faith in the basic posture of informed empathy.

Without it, we'll never have good conversations.

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